

# The wider significance of 21st February in national life

HARUN UR RASHID

21ST February is more than a language movement. Although ostensibly on this day, Barkat, Jabbar, Rafiq, and Salam sacrificed their precious lives for honour and preservation of their mother language, Bangla, it has a wider significance in our national life.

Those male students who fought for the language movement by breaking the Section 144 are well known in our society. Female students had also a fair share in the movement. Groups of female students broke Section 144 and were arrested in large numbers. Scores were injured in the initial brutal *lathi* charge. If I recall correctly, among those arrested were Sufia Ahmed (*nee* Ibrahim), Farida Bari, Kamrun Nahar Laily, Firoza Begum, Jaharat Ara Rahela, and Johra Tara.

21st February in fact laid the foundation for a separate state of Bangladesh. Bengali nationalism has its roots in the Bangla language. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's words "I am Bengali, my

nationalism is Bengal" sum up the essence of Bengali nationalism.

The spirit of the language movement contained a powerful stimulus in the direction of a broader economic and social agenda. Achieving independent statehood is only a means to emancipate poor people from bonds of endemic poverty by improving upon their standard of living through providing basic necessities of life including food, clothing, shelter, education, and primary health care. That is what *Muktir Sangram* (struggle for emancipation) is all about.

## Importance of mother language

Mother language is what a baby child communicates for the first time with parents. It is a language that remains with that person for life, wherever the person may live. The mother language is a prism that determines our first notions of the world and its environment. The umbilical cord between mother tongue and individual personality is inseparable. Mother language is an issue that people naturally deeply feel for it and it is an issue on which passions are easily roused.

Eminent writers and scholars

21st February is a day of reflection and provides an opportunity in considering to what extent we have fulfilled the ideals for which ultimate sacrifices were made in 1952. Furthermore, social justice and economic inequality among people needs to be addressed together with strengthening democratic tradition—namely, compromise, cooperation and accommodation of diverse views with respect. We will be judged by our deeds not by our mere words on this day.

have emphasized the importance of mother language in national life. Scottish essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called the language "the body of thought." This implies if mother language is crushed, thoughts and ideas will inevitably die. American statesman, scientist, and author Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) who helped draw up the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 was worried that if the German language was not checked, it would not only supercede the English language, but also its cultural values in America.

## International Mother Language Day

We are proud that at the initiative of Bangladesh, in 2000, 21st February has formally been recognized by the Paris-based UNESCO (United

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) as the International Mother Language Day. While announcing, the UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura stated that "language is an essential component of identity and a means by which we find our place in the world."

Many hundreds of mother languages have disappeared from the world. Out of 6 billion people only 6,000 mother languages exist according to UNESCO. Presence of diverse mother languages represents rich cultural pluralism, tolerance, and mutual respect. With the onset of globalization and interdependence of countries, only a few languages have become global languages of commerce, education, science, and culture. As a result many mother languages are dying out and UNESCO has taken initia-

tive to ensure that diversity of languages exists in the world.

Although one may sacrifice his life for preservation of mother language, it does not mean that an individual should not learn and speak other foreign languages. People get enriched in communicating with others of different cultures with diverse languages. Multilingual skill is a great asset and constitutes one of the important components of our international relations with people of other countries.

Bangladesh needs to set up an Institute of International Mother Languages to energize and revive the vigour of existing diverse languages so as to provide a leadership in this respect as contemplated by UNESCO.

## Language Day ideals

of five can read and write Bangla. Recent Millennium Report by the UNDP shows that enrolment rate at primary level has increased to 82.7 per cent in 2003 (73.7 per cent in 1992). Although it is a good record, yet 17.3 per cent of children are left out.

Ordinarily primary education is free in the country, however, parents have to spend money on school dress, learning equipment and tools and transport and those who are extremely poor cannot afford to provide such expenses for children. Another fact merits attention. Bangladesh is proud to have more than 45 ethnic groups (about 2 of the total population) with their own mother languages. Although they speak Bangla, they use their own mother tongue within their family. Many linguists suggest that the government must make efforts to protect the mother tongue of each and every

ethnic and linguistic group in the country.

## Conclusion

21st February is a day of reflection and provides an opportunity in considering to what extent we have fulfilled the ideals for which ultimate sacrifices were made in 1952. Furthermore, social justice and economic inequality among people needs to be addressed together with strengthening democratic tradition—namely, compromise, cooperation and accommodation of diverse views with respect. We will be judged by our deeds not by our mere words on this day.

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# The value and cost of emergency response

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I have read the detailed chronology of the incredibly tragic events leading up to the death of SAMS Kibria as published in his family sponsored website www.kibria.org. The evil intents and the failure of law enforcers aside, what is revealed is the incomprehensible failure of the emergency response system in particular and the health services in general to save a man's life.

The questions I raise now are neither about the political responsibilities nor about the legal duties of the state, but rather about its management of a medical crisis. In other words, I ask what would have happened if an ordinary citizen, instead of a well-respected and influential former minister, happened to be in Habiganj on the evening of January 27, 2004, and was suffering from profuse bleeding following an explosion?

What prompts me to write this is a near tragic event here in the Silicon Valley, California involving an infant undergoing a febrile seizure (convulsions caused by sudden increase of brain activity). Upon calling emergency help, one fire brigade and one paramedic truck arrived within 3 minutes and an ambulance followed shortly after. The child was given thorough primary examination and an oxygen mask was put on her face; further medical treatment including Valium was administered by a qualified paramedic in the ambulance;

according to the mother who was allowed to ride in the ambulance, it was in constant communication with the emergency room (ER) at the receiving hospital. An assembly of 15 doctors, nurses and medical emergency staff were ready to receive the child 10 minutes later.

Another controversy has been created by claims that offers of helicopter transport were turned down. Who made the offer and to whom? Who turned it down? If attempts were made to contact higher authorities for assistance, technically it is a simple enough task to go through people's phone records and establish the facts.

By then the child was fully unconscious and unable to breathe by herself.

For the next 75 minutes, as trains of medical staff went in and out, electric shock was given for resuscitation and the infant was put on artificial breathing apparatus. By some divine intervention and a lot of timely critical medical care the infant was stabilized. Over the course of the next hour, a CAT scan and a Meningitis test was carried out. Only after initial tests showed the crisis was over, the child was transported in an ambulance to a specialist pediatric intensive care unit in another hospital.

A paramedic was again with the child -- now heavily sedated, still unconscious and breathing through tubes. Another set of nurses, medical technicians and a senior doctor received them; all pertinent information was communicated to the new

crew in a succinct written document by everyone starting from the fire brigade crew, the ambulance crew, the ER and the second paramedic. The child regained consciousness the next morning and was released two days later. The medical cost for all this treatment was about \$40,000

to a government ambulance and the convoy set off for Dhaka. Alas, when it arrived at the gates of Birdem nearly four hours after sustaining the grievous injuries, Mr. Kibria had already died.

What concerns me the most about this episode is the apparent lack of

-- paid for by medical insurance.

What's poignant about this story is that one of the other patients in the ICU was a teenaged Hispanic boy brought in a helicopter following severe abdominal bleeding from a gunshot wound. The incident occurred in a relatively remote place approximately 45 from the hospital and road transport in an ambulance would have easily taken over an hour. According to the aforementioned website, in the quest for Mr. Kibria's emergency treatment precious time was lost time and time again as if in a horror movie where the protagonist uses every bit last breath in search of respite and shelter only for the place to turn out to be the depths of hell. It took 30 minutes to get Mr. Kibria to the local Habiganj General Hospital that didn't even have enough cotton for a bandage not to mention saline.

The obvious question is why is that hospital even open if it cannot provide the minimum level of care? Then a somewhat irrational decision was made to take him 100 miles south to Dhaka instead of 55 miles north to Sylhet a private ambulance -- with a police escort and his private car in toe.

Alas, the ambulance ran out of fuel after only 5 miles; how could the driver of the not know this before embarking on a 100-mile long journey? Another precious 40 minutes are lost in hunt for diesel as Mr. Kibria's personal driver had to travel a total of some 20 miles west and back to Jagdishpur! After driving for another half an hour, Kibria's ambulance arrived at Madhabpur Government Hospital only to discover there was no doctor on duty; 15 minutes later, Kibria was transferred

any kind of communication or coordination for medical and logistic assistance. As I understand it, mobile phones are in regular use in Bangladesh and work pretty well. I imagine the signal coverage is especially strong along a national highway that Kibria's convoy seems to have taken. Without the slightest intent to point fingers at anyone, I ask why couldn't someone call hospitals ahead of the convoy arriving there? In spite of the panic that ensued, what are the medical protocols for coordinating an effort like this? Why couldn't anyone summon a helicopter? Even though it must have been dark, it would not have been impossible to locate the convoy especially since there was a police escort.

Another controversy has been created by claims that offers of helicopter transport were turned down. Who made the offer and to whom? Who turned it down? If attempts were made to contact higher authorities for assistance, technically it is a simple enough task to go through people's phone records and establish the facts. Every phone call, whether it is from a fixed or a mobile set, is recorded by the telecom service provider (for routing and billing purposes) and it should be easy for them to reveal who called whom, when the call was made and how long the call lasted. Given the will, I am sure the forensic experts will be able to paint an accurate picture of what really happened and although too late for Mr. Kibria, valuable lessons can be learnt to avoid a repeat of our collective failures.

From a medical point of view, the bottom line is saving lives. Is it time to start thinking about introducing a centralized dispatch system with a

single call-in phone number for the emergency services? What are the views of the doctors and nurses? According to a former doctor at Sylhet Hospital, a lot of precious time is lost as emergency staffs are inundated with phone calls from influential quarters in high profile cases; a lot of pressure is put on them instead of letting them focus on their life saving task.

In country of nearly 150 million with a per capita income of under \$400 who gets to decide who lives and who dies? Is it fair to compare Bangladesh with the US (per capita income is \$30,000) where much of medical care is provided through private insurance with monthly premiums running up to a few hundred dollars per person? What about comparisons to a pseudo-welfare state like the UK (per capita income of \$23,000) where healthcare is free? How much does it cost to administer a relatively simple medical treatment like providing saline, stopping bleeding and blood transfusion to save a life?

Shabbir A. Bashar, PhD writes from the San Francisco Bay Area, USA.

2.5X3

3X3

2.5X2

6X2

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